CHURCH IN A NEW CENTURY
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1 COR 12:27-31
1 COR 13:1-8

Everybody, it seems, has an opinion about what's wrong with the church, why the church seems to be in decline, what churches need to do to reinvent themselves. The section on my bookshelf for the church (i.e.: what's wrong with it) is literally bursting at the seams. The problem is that people with opinions about the church are inclined to write books and people who care about the church are inclined to buy and read them — a happy development from my perspective — and then they invite the author to come and talk some more about the topic adding to the horrendous volume of rhetoric already invested in the topic. As I was preparing these remarks on Thursday morning, my eldest child, a mother of three and an Elder in her Dallas Presbyterian congregation called and asked what I was going to talk about and I said, "What wrong with the church and how to fix it." She responded, not too respectfully, "Gosh Dad, I hope they're going to give you about a week to talk. You have a lot of opinions on the subject and I've heard most of them." This is the child who still warns her four younger siblings (ages 40-30), not ever to ask Dad an open-ended question unless you are prepared for a very lengthy answer, much more than you ever wanted in the first place. So consider yourself forewarned.

It is terribly easy to be critical of the church these days, even to dismiss the church as irrelevant. Sociologists are telling us that modern — or postmodern religion is and will be an individual matter, not institutional. One of the most important of these sociologists of religion, Wade Clark Roof, calls the United States, *A Nation of Seekers*, not joiners. "Spirituality" is the rage, a privatized quest for God, meaning, happiness, or at least good feelings — which has less and less to do with religion as we know it, particularly institutional religion. "I'm a spiritual person," Americans are inclined to say. "But I'm not religious." Which means: "I read books on spirituality, write in a journal about my spiritual journey, practice deep breathing, yoga, and meditation before breakfast, and watch Oprah Winfrey — but I don't go to church."

Let's look first globally at a very interesting phenomenon. Christianity, the church, is growing at an unprecedented rate in other places. Perhaps you saw the excellent article in the Atlantic Monthly last October by Philip Jenkins, Professor of History and Religious Studies at Penn State, *The Next*

Christianity. Jenkins' thesis is that the modern world — this world you and I live in — arose from the trauma of the Protestant Reformation. We are now — Jenkins argues — at the beginning of a Second Reformation, what he calls a "Global Convulsion" that will shape the coming century.

The heart of Christianity, the physical center or the Christian world for the past several centuries has been Western Europe and North America. But in the last half of this twentieth century, the center of the Christian world moved decisively to Africa, Latin America, and Asia, and the professor says the balance will never shift back.

The growth of Christianity in Africa is stunning. In 1900 there were 10 million Christians in Africa in a total population of 107 million — 9%. Today there are 360 million Christians in Africa out of a total population of 784 million — 46%.

In the next 25 years the population of the world's Christians is expected to grow to 2.6 billion — by far the largest religion in the world.

Here are some more interesting statistics Jenkins has discovered:

- One half of all the churchgoers in London are black.
- African and West Indian churches in Britain are reaching out to whites. Annual Roman Catholic baptisms in the Philippines are higher than Italy, France, Spain, and Poland combined.
- There are more practicing Anglicans in Nigeria than in any other country — second place is Uganda.
- Southern hemisphere Christianity is much more conservative and on occasion, anti-intellectual.

Within our Reformed Presbyterian family there are staggering changes as well. The church in Korea is big and growing and sending missionaries all over the world — including the USA. The American Korean churches are the only part of our present family showing aggressive growth.

There are now more Presbyterians in Kenya than in the United States — the Presbyterian Church of East Africa is large and growing rapidly and far outstripping its ability to educate leaders.

The Presbyterian Church of Brazil sends Portuguese-speaking missionaries to USA cities to evangelize Portuguese speaking American communities.

In the meantime, in our small PC (U.S.A.) family we seem determined to exhaust all our resources, financial, personal, and spiritual, fighting among ourselves — all the while our membership continues to decline. Someone is always sitting down with a calculator and figuring out that at the present

rate of decline the last living Presbyterian in America will expire sometime in the year 2,117.

That's not serious, of course. The picture is more complicated than that. Membership loss is not an even-across-the-board, phenomenon. Some congregations are growing — conservative and liberal. Certain denominations are growing. The Southern Baptists seem to be doing all right. Pentecostals are doing just fine. The Catholics also seem to be okay, the current leadership crisis notwithstanding. Ideologies of the right always try to argue that membership loss is about "creeping liberalism" — that good, salt-of-the-earth, middle class Americans are essentially conservative and when the denominations were captured by liberals in the 60's; Presbyterians, United Church of Christ, and Methodists, quit their local churches and became Southern Baptists. That's simply not true. We know now beyond a doubt that people do not quit and join churches on the basis of the so-called liberal/conservative divide. Recent research by Andrew Greeley, who is a distinguished sociologist when he is not writing racy novels about priests, thoroughly debunks the liberal/conservative myth of church membership analysis. What it's about, Greeley proves, is birth rates. Conservatives have more babies than liberals, the reason for which are beyond my expertise — although fun to contemplate. Greeley argues that conservative Protestants are less comfortable with artificial contraception and came to birth control methods much more slowly than more progressive Protestants. Whatever the reason, there are fewer mainline babies born per 100 mainline adults, so we could solve the dilemma by having bigger families. The other thing we could do is start more churches. That, I think, is how the Southern Baptists are doing it. It is how we Presbyterians used to do it. From colonial days onward, denominations grew by sending missionary evangelists to where people were moving and establishing congregations. That's how we did it the last time in my memory — New Church Development. That's how I began my ministry, by the way: called and paid by the Board of National Missions. In 1963, I knocked on doors in a community where there was no Presbyterian church and organized one. It's still there too. Why can't we do that today? Well, one reason is financial. $100,000 used to be enough to establish a ministry in a community for three years, rent a house, space for an office, and make a down payment on 4 acres of property, with more left over. To do that today in Chicago costs more than a million dollars. And no denomination has that kind of money.

In the meantime, people who do go to church, who express their spirituality institutionally, people who know the church intimately — have a lover's quarrel with it.

Author Annie Dilliard—

> "What a pity, that so hard on the heels of Christ come the Christians (the church). Who can believe in them?"
> [*Incarnation, Contemporary Writers on the New Testament,* p.36, Edited by Alfred Corn]

The English poet Southey:

> "I could believe in Christ if he did not drag behind him his leprous bride, the church." (William Willimon, *What's Right With the Church,* p.3)?

William Willimon, Chaplain at Duke and former parish pastor —

> "Jesus has many admirers who feel he married beneath his station. They love Christ but are unable to love those whom he loved…For most of us the church is an embarrassment." (p. 3, 13)

Bill Gates, certified again as the richest man in the world and therefore granted instant status as a profoundly wise man as well—

> "Just in terms of the allocation of time resources, religion is not very efficient. There's a lot more I could be doing on Sunday morning."

And on that same topic, Willimon tells about a church visitation team from his Methodist parish calling on a young woman who said that she did not like 'organized religion' and a team member replied, "Well, you'll be happy at Northside Church: we've been trying for thirty years but we ain't got it organized yet." (Ibid p.36)

The church, the actual church, not the abstract idea of the church, but the actual church we say we believe in, made of real flesh and blood people, has always been something of an anomaly. It's helpful, therefore, to go back to the beginning and look again at the earliest church, the N.T. church. Fortunately we know quite a bit about it because of the existing letters we have, written by Paul, our first missionary and theologian.

Listen to these words written by Paul to a church, the tiny Christian community in the Greek-speaking city of Corinth. Before they were scripture they were simply a letter:

> Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still

more excellent way.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.
It bears all things, hopes all things, endures, all things. Love never ends.

"I will show you a still more excellent way," St. Paul wrote to the little Christian church in Corinth. It was a church not acting like a church is supposed to act, which is to say, acting like the church often acts; arguing, disputing, naming calling, dividing into separate groups and organizations, making a spectacle itself, discrediting the Gospel, looking a little like the PC(U.S.A.) looks these days, with our controversial issues and name-calling, our judicial proceedings and condemnations of one another as apostate and heretical.

I'll show you a better way, Paul said. "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or clanging cymbal; if I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing."

They are among the most familiar and beloved words in the language, read at countless weddings — even though the situation which prompted them was anything but romantic.
As he has earlier in his letter to the Corinthian church, Paul draws on a word and a concept from Greek literature, Agape — familiar and still revolutionary —an attitude of self-giving, a way of relating that regards the needs of the other, or the community, before personal needs. Agape is a big concept. It doesn't have much to do with feelings at all. It has a lot to do with how people relate to one another in community, which means it is primarily a social and political word.

There is a better way to relate than the normal human mode of relating with others based on self-preservation first, then self-satisfaction, self-fulfillment, self-actualization. Self—Self—Self. That's how human societies, human institutions work—by addressing my needs as an individual. Our economic

engine is built on it—an economic machine designed to produce and allow me to purchase whatever I want, or whatever I have become convinced that I need to be fulfilled and happy.

Bill McKibben, author of *Returning God to the Center: Consumerism and the Environmental Threat*, says that what defines and shapes our culture is not the Biblical story, or the Christian consensus, or the Judeo-Christian tradition — but television. America's kids watch an average of 4 ½ hours a day. "McKibben gathered 2400 hours of videotape — all the programs offered on TV during one day, studied them for a year, and concluded that the distillation of all those thousands of game shows and talk shows and sitcoms and commercials was the simple notion: "You are the most important thing on the face of the earth. Your immediate desires are all that count. Do it your way. This Bud's for you." [See Marva Dawn, *A Royal Waste of Time*, P.99]

There is an alternative way of thinking Paul proposes. It was radically counter-culture in the first century and remains so in the 21st century. This way was actually lived out once, in the world, in human history, in a human being. Jesus of Nazareth who Paul asserts was God's only son, the embodiment of the reality and mystery of God. He was a man for others. He lived out his life on behalf of others. He gave his life away. That's who God is, Paul is saying, not some Olympian figure, muscular, sitting on a mighty throne, casting thunderbolts or frowning in judgment at human misdeeds, judging, condemning. No—God is here—this one who does not condemn—this one who gives life away for others. This one who says "blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek", this one who goes out of his way to include the very ones his own religion condemned and excluded: the unclean, the socially unacceptable, the marginal, the sinners: this one who leaves 99 sheep to track the one who is lost: this one who opens his arms and great heart and welcomes the uninvited to the banquet table in his kingdom: this one who says, "if you save your life you lose it, if you give your life away in my name, you will find it"—this one who follows the way of Agape to the end, dying on a cross, Christ crucified.

That is who God is and that is who we are called to be.

Paul said the church will look like Jesus — "The Body of Christ," he said.

It's the church Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians, not a happily married couple — a community that lives in the world and reminds people of Jesus by the way it acts, by the quality of its life.

My thesis is that we are called to live in the world as the Body of Christ.

John Cobb, one of our best thinkers, in a book, *Reclaiming the Church*, offers some advice. There are three marks of a vital church…

The first is cultural engagement. It is openly and intentionally incarnational. The Word became flesh: God's word — God's love — God's passion became Jesus who lived thoroughly in the world. That's what the church is supposed to do and be. Not a sheltered cloister, isolating, protecting us from the world, but a body that lives in and is engaged with the world. Let me give you an example.

In Croatia, there is a small but heroic Presbyterian Reformed Church living right in the middle of that troubled culture, deeply divided along ethnic and religious lines: Croatian Catholics, Bosnian Muslims, Serbian Orthodox; each hates the others with about equal intensity, although it does seem that Serb hatred is more violent. You may recall the phrase "ethic cleansing," which was essentially what the Serbs did to the Bosnian Muslims. In Croatia, Serbian armies occupied Muslim communities, killed the men and boys, sent the women and children to dreadful refugee camps where many of the women were repeatedly raped, and resettled the village with Serbians. When the Croatian army gathered its forces it drove the Serbs back and now the process of rebuilding and resettling the Muslim villages is occurring. The Reformed Church — with a strong assist from the PC (U.S.A.) sponsors the Agape Project — to assist with feeding the hungry, helping refuges and rebuilding and resettling the old villages. While I was there I met a man I will never forget, Antol Bolag, a Serbian who had a religious conversion, gave up his career as an accountant, and signed up with Agape to help with rebuilding/reconciliation. His job was assembling the resources, the raw materials, and labor to rebuild the Muslim villages — often times completely destroyed by the fleeing Serbians. One particularly appalling devise was to plant mines and explosives in the houses to welcome their former occupants. In any event, Antol was working with a Muslim village chief, the Mayor, to rebuild a village and noticed that that plans did not include the Mosque which the Serbs had leveled on their way out of town. "Why no Mosque?" Antol asked the Mayor and the Mayor responded, "Why would we expect Christians to rebuild our Mosque? You've been trying to convert us for a thousand years. Why would you help us build our house of worship?" Antol responded, "We will help you rebuild your Mosque because we follow one who calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves — one who stands by the side of the road to build up the wounds of a stranger with no thought of his religious preference.

The first sign of a vital church is cultural engagement.

The second mark of a vital church, according to Cobb is responsiveness to societal challenge. The world is different today from the world in which our

church was first established. And a vital church will understand those changes and respond creatively. Each congregation has to identify what is new and urgent in its own situation and respond appropriately. At Fourth Presbyterian Church we try to remember that we're in an urban landscape — that one of the new and pressing needs of urban Americans is for community — and we must work hard at being a welcoming, hospitable presence. Thus, we are open. Our front door on Michigan Avenue stands open all day, every day. People come and go, walk in, look around, sit down and rest or pray or reflect. We also try to remind ourselves that our guests don't always bring church experience with them and don't always know the vocabulary. A simple thing, but if your new 21st century adult American comes to church for a visit and encounters a strange, mysterious vocabulary, he/she will be lost. Narthex? Doxology? Nave? Chancel? Garth? All wonderful words but we don't dare assume our guests will know what we mean when we say, "After the Gloria, please exit the nave through the door to the transept."

Now, I'm a traditionalist to my core and I believe that our tradition has within it the capacity to be open. In fact, our best tradition is to respond to change. The motto of our branch of the Reformation, after all, is Reformata — Semper Reformanda: Reformed but always Reforming. It's helpful to remember that John Calvin's world was changing radically too. He was a humanist scholar before he was a Reformer and one of the ideas he had to struggle with was the revolutionary Copernican notion that the sun, not the earth, was at the center of the universe.

What we all must do — those of us who God has called to be responsible for the life of the church in this time — is be open to the new. Martin Marty says that the last 7 words of the institutional church will be, "But we never did that way before!"

All the management experts in the world teach one basic truth — namely that institutional survival will depend in the future on the ability to understand change, manage change, initiate change.

So don't be afraid to do it different. Be responsive to your neighbor and neighborhood, your city, the state of Virginia, the world.

Third, a vital church will <u>think theologically</u>.

What doesn't change about us is our faith — the "unshakeable foundation," of our faith in God as God has come to us in Jesus Christ. What doesn't change is our commitment to live out our calling to be his body — with integrity and courage and love.

There is a real hunger for authentic religion in the world today and a real responsiveness when the church shows itself will to be the incarnation of God's love for the world.

Love is not afraid of anything. Love is not afraid to tell the truth and to live the truth. Love is not afraid to break with convention and cultural custom. Love isn't afraid to take risks, to reach across racial, economic, religious, or gender boundaries: love takes chances in offering hospitality to those who are marginalized, kept out, scorned by the world. Love, in the name of Jesus Christ, is always more worried about who is excluded than who is included. Love is not weak and passive.

This radical new way of being has the power and eternity of God in it, and so in life, in individual lives and in the collective life lived by the community of believers, it can bear all things, it can believe all things, it can hope all things, it can endure all things, anything, everything. Because love—this mysterious essence of God—this absolute foundation of the universe and of human life—this love never ends. And when somehow, by God's good grace, the community does it, embodies the reality of God's love, a miracle happens: it becomes the Body of Christ, the Church.

> "None of us," Barbara Wheeler, President of Auburn Seminary, says in a paper she wrote, *Who Needs Organized Religion?* "None of us is strong enough to keep loving God in those dark nights of the soul when it feels as if God doesn't care about our pain and may even be causing it…Every believer at some time has felt abandoned by God."

…Words which speak for all of us when we face tragedy, defeat, loss, death, or national disasters such as the Columbia Space Shuttle Tragedy or September 11, or for that matter, whatever lies ahead.

> "In such moments, when God is far away, when our faith is weak or non-existent…in moments like these we need the church, all those other lovers of God who, in tough times, keep the faith."

And I thought of one of our members who died a few years ago of AIDS. He loved the Presbyterian Church, but the PC(U.S.A.) has built a barrier to keep individuals like Glen from becoming ministers, or Elders, or Deacons. In spite of that he was an active member and participant in the life of the congregation and never missed worship — as long as he was able. I keep a picture of him so I don't forget him — as a reminder of him and what he said and taught me about the church — because even ministers become impatient with the church sometimes wonder about it and are tempted to think that real religion is a private personal spirituality.

When he could no longer attend worship, Glenn listened to the Sunday morning worship service tapes. Near the end he was in a hospice facility and on one of my last visits he talked about his life and death. It was, I recall, two weeks before Easter. The "Big One" he called it. The one we all need to hear. I asked him, "What's the hardest part?" He told me that it was hard to fall asleep at night. He was so sick and at night when all the guests and family had gone home, he felt alone with his pain and his weakness and the knowledge that he was dying. "You know what I do?" he said. "I get out my tape player and put on my ear phones and listen to the Sunday worship service. I must have a hundred tapes. It settles me down. Sometimes I fall asleep during the prelude or anthem and often during your sermon (I'm not the only one who does that!)…but almost every night I go to sleep that way — here in bed, but also in my church."

St. Paul said, "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

So there it is. We live in a new world with new challenges, dangers, and opportunities. And we live with the commission to be the Body of Christ, the incarnation of God's love.

You are the Body of Christ, the incarnation of:

Love that bears all things,
Believes all things,
Hopes all things,
Endures all things,
Love that never ends.

That is the challenge and the promise.